

March 23, 2020

Ms. Tina Namian
Chief, School Programs Branch
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Policy and Program Development Division
Food and Nutrition Service

SUBJECT: Proposed Rule “Simplifying Meal Service and Monitoring Requirements in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs” Docket No. FNS-2019-0007

Dear Ms. Namian:

As Pediatricians and child health researchers at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and PolicyLab, we welcome this opportunity to comment on the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Proposed Rule “Simplifying Meal Service and Monitoring Requirements in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs” and to offer our recommendations.

CHOP is the Philadelphia region’s largest pediatric health care network with over 30 clinical locations for primary and subspecialty care throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and PolicyLab is a center of emphasis within CHOP’s Research Institute working to translate this practice expertise into policy.

Rates of food insecurity across Philadelphia (21%) are significantly higher than the national average (16%),¹ and in many neighborhoods, food insecurity rates exceed 30%.² Food-insecure children experience poor health stemming from poor nutrition, including delayed development, anemia, and school difficulties in the short term, as well as long-term problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity.¹ These children depend on the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs as their primary source of nutrition during the academic year. Access to school meals also significantly improves students’ academic performance, contributing to improved attendance, behavior, and reading and math scores on achievement tests.³

We welcome the efforts that you are making to streamline the process for schools to administer these programs and increase participation in the School Breakfast Program. Philadelphia has seen tremendous benefits in recent years with the passage of the Community Eligibility Provision. We are eager to see further enhancements to the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (NSLP, SBP), however, we have significant concerns that some provisions

of the proposed rule would weaken nutritional standards and result in detrimental health outcomes for all children, with a disproportionate impact on those who need and utilize the program the most.⁴

What follows are our recommendations to ensure the maximum benefit of these critical programs for children:

Facilitate the Service of Vegetable Subgroups in the NSLP

Continue to guarantee that children receive a school meal with a variety of vegetables that provide a full array of much needed nutrients.

We strongly discourage the USDA from reducing the amount of vegetables that must be served from the red and orange vegetables category (which includes tomatoes, carrots and squash), and the other vegetables category (which includes cucumbers, cauliflower and avocados). U.S. dietary guidelines emphasize adequate consumption from all vegetable subgroups because of variations in the nutrients they provide.⁵ The two categories proposed for reduction (red and orange vegetables, and other vegetables) are already under-consumed, particularly among adolescents.⁵

Reducing this requirement would open the door to children missing nutrients and heavier reliance on nutrient poor preparation of vegetables such as french fries. We encourage the USDA to maintain the current regulatory requirements for the red and orange and other vegetable sub-categories.

Flexibility to Established Age/Grade Groups

Maintain current regulations requiring schools to offer meals that meet the nutritional requirements for the age/grade group of each student.

The three grade groups (Kindergarten-5th grade, 6th-8th grade and 9th-12th grade), are science-based categories that are designed to meet the specific nutritional and calorie level needs of that age range. Current U.S. Dietary Guidelines for children outline precise daily intake goals for various macronutrients, vitamins, and minerals, and many of these recommendations vary significantly by age group.⁴ Under the proposed regulations, a school with students ranging from elementary to high school could serve all the students meals based on the meal pattern for

elementary students (K-5), leaving the middle and high school students likely to be hungry, underfed, and lacking in key nutrients.⁴ This is particularly concerning given that in recently published data from school year 2014-2015, the USDA determined that only 41% of school lunch menus fell within the specified calorie range, and that high school lunch menus were more likely to fall below the minimum calorie level.⁵

Flexibility to Offer Meats/Meat Alternates at Breakfast

Integrate nutrition safeguards into the proposed option to allow schools to offer a meat/meat alternate or a grain product at breakfast.

We are concerned regarding the possible implications of the proposal to allow meats or meat alternates instead of grain products at breakfast, especially when combined with the reduction of the required fruit component and/or possibility of substituting potatoes and other starchy vegetables in place of fruit. Meats and meat alternatives (particularly non-lean⁵ and processed⁷ varieties) tend to be high in fat, sodium, and calories and, especially when served in high proportions, contribute to increased cardiovascular risk.⁵ If the USDA continues to pursue this path, we strongly suggest that it does so together with reinstating the requirement for all grain products to be wholegrain rich, and instituting controls on the calories and sodium in the meat/meat alternates served at breakfast.

Flexibility in SBP Fruit Component

All children eating a school breakfast should continue to receive the current required one cup of fruit regardless of the setting.

We welcome the focus on expanding flexibility in programming to encourage more schools to offer breakfast in the classroom. However, this flexibility should not adversely affect the nutrient-rich meal that children need. It goes without saying, but children's dietary requirements remain the same regardless of the location of the breakfast program. The proposed change allowing school breakfast operators to offer only ½ cup of fruit outside the cafeteria could significantly decrease the amount of fruit servings that a child eats in a week. Many parents rely on the school system's provision of fresh produce and similar nutrient-dense foods, most youth already do not consume sufficient quantities of fruit⁸, and lower-income families face particular challenges in accessing fruit and vegetables.⁹ We are also concerned about the potential of

underfeeding children by offering less fruit. As mentioned in the proposed rule, nearly 1 in 5 average weekly menus for high schools already offer too few calories.⁶

Substituting Vegetables for Fruits at Breakfast

Potatoes and starchy vegetables should not replace fruit or any other foods with higher nutritional content.

Potatoes and starchy vegetables are calorie dense foods that contribute significantly to the rise of obesity. In adults, there is compelling evidence that greater consumption of potatoes, especially french fries, is associated with a higher risk of Type 2 Diabetes, independent of Body Mass Index (BMI) and other factors.^{10,11} While potatoes do contain potassium, an essential mineral, potatoes lose between 50-75% of their potassium content when they are cut into small pieces and boiled.¹² Levels of phosphorus, magnesium, sulfur, zinc, manganese and iron are also reduced through this cooking method.¹² Common preparations, such as hash browns and mashed potatoes, are less nutritious than would be expected by looking only at the nutrient content of raw potatoes.

School meals help to establish and shape eating habits that can last throughout life.¹³ If children are used to having potatoes and french fries with most meals, they are more likely to expect them as adults, putting them at higher risk for overweight and diabetes over time. Potatoes and starchy vegetables are some of the first foods that we recommend eliminating for children with obesity, pre-diabetes and those at high risk for diabetes. We are also concerned that the proposed substitution could allow, for instance, for hash browns instead of an apple, leading to immediate spikes and drops of blood sugar that contribute to poor attention in school.¹⁴

Update Meal Modifications for Disability and Non-Disability Reasons

Any professional advising the family on food and meal-related behaviors should have the ability to make recommendations for children needing special accommodations.

We welcome the recognition that children may have special dietary needs, and we agree that persons beyond a licensed physician or nurse practitioner should be able to request substitutions for these children. Allowing other professionals to make these judgments would allow children to more easily get the mealtime accommodations that they need. We would recommend

extending the list to include all professionals involved in a child's care such as: dietitians, case workers, social workers, therapists, etc.

Grain-based Desserts in the Child and Adult Care Food Program

Do not allow grain-based desserts (e.g., cakes, cookies and donuts) to count towards the grain requirement.

Allowing grain-based desserts to count towards the grain requirement could lead to a reduction in consumption of healthy, non-sweetened, whole grain foods. We agree that food offered in school lunches must be palatable to youth, but we question the extent to which changes are needed in order to entice youth to eat whole grains and participate in the program. Data shows the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act has not led to a reduction in NSLP participation,¹⁵ and whole grain consumption was increasing before the whole grain requirements were relaxed in 2018.¹⁶ Allowing grain-based desserts to count towards the grain requirement could shift students toward consumption of unhealthier products.

Throughout the proposed rule, the USDA emphasizes the potential of various changes to reduce food waste. We agree that food waste is a significant national concern, and we welcome opportunities to reduce it. However, we caution against attributing food waste to changes that have improved the nutritional quality of school meals. In its School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, the USDA indicates that levels of food waste were largely unchanged before and after implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.⁴ Consumption of both fruits and vegetables increased after the Act was implemented,¹⁷ and only 12% of students have indicated they dislike their school meals.⁴ Rather than weaken essential nutritional standards, we recommend that the USDA promote steps that have shown more promise in reducing food waste,¹⁸ such as ensuring that all students have sufficient time to consume their meals.¹⁹

In closing, we recognize the challenges that school administrators may face in adhering to specific guidelines for school meals, and we agree that when possible, increasing flexibility may be beneficial to both administrators and students. However, such changes must not come at the expense of providing healthy foods based on evidence-based nutrition guidelines. Healthy school meals are essential to children's short-term and long-term health and well-being, including their ability to succeed academically and to become healthy, productive adults.

PolicyLab

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments, and for taking the time to consider our feedback. We look forward to seeing the final version of the proposal and welcome an opportunity to continue to engage with you.

Sincerely,



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